

REBEL DESTINY

524 The man looked so moved by what he told us that we had qualms about continuing the conversation with him about his dead family, and so we asked him about the game board. "Why is it, Kasanya, that young Amnika of your village said he could not make us a game board, fine carver that he is? You yourself know that the board is just a piece of wood with holes in it for the seeds. It is not beautiful; there are no decorations on it."

765 "It is because he is young. His hair isn't white like mine.
524 Making an adji board is a big thing. It's not a little thing. It is on this we play when the body of the dead lies in the house of mourning to entertain his spirit, his yorka. Only an old man who has lost his wife may make a board for this game which is played for the dead."

[559] "But suppose he did make it?"
[779] "Then he would get a kunu, Bakra," he said with an impatient cluck which was intended to deplore the white man's inability to understand simple things.

776 And so again we came to kunu, and since he himself had brought it up, we decided to stir the hole once more to see what was in it. Kasanya talked with less hesitation than we had come to expect. It is easier for an older man who has had experience with the spirits and knows their ways to talk about the supernatural. He understands what he may and may not do, and then, too, with his greater knowledge he can tell more without offending the spirits who disapprove of a man's telling too great a part of his store.

"Yes, Bakra, kunu is a difficult thing for you, a white man, to understand. But we black people know what brings kunu. Many things bring kunu. Look, I made three children. Fine men all three. One died, the second died, the third died. . . ."

• 688 This was his story. His wife's mother's brother brought the curse on his family. He had cut a new field, and the trees he had felled and the brush he had cut had been lying for some time, as was proper, that the dead wood might be burned off to clear the ground so that the ash might enrich the soil.

KUNU

enrich the soil. Now before a field is chosen for cutting, it must be surveyed carefully to see that there are no snakes to be injured; that no trees which have strong spirits like the silk-cotton tree, or the parasitic akataai, will be destroyed; that no ant hill whether on the ground or on a tree be disturbed. But Kasanya's wife's mother's brother was careless, or unlucky. A small ant hill had escaped his notice. 688 ●
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"The *Akantamasu* god is powerful. It is a bad god," Kasanya said over and over, making of it a refrain to his story. [116]

When the ant hill was destroyed, its spirit fixed itself upon the family. Kasanya's wife's mother became ill, and although the contents of one obia pot after another were used up in bathing her with sangrafu and the serabaki and chembe leaves, she did not get better. Her husband, an able obia man, made special charms for her to wear about her neck, and sprinkled her with medicine with the feather of the sacred opete, the vulture, but still her illness kept on. [155]

At last they went to a diviner. To the village of Dahomey they went, the village where the most powerful obia was lodged, and there she learned that the *Akantamasu* god had come to the family. The diviner told her how to serve the god so that she might have respite—the days that were sacred to him, the dances she must dance on these days, the sacrifices to make. They knew that it would never be a friendly god to them, for it had come as a kunu. There was more trouble and more. The family gave many offerings, and the possessed woman danced whenever the spirit seized her, but soon she died, and the others have been dying since. [187]
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"What happened to the man who destroyed the ant hill? Did he get the *Akantamasu* gadu?" 688

"No, not he himself. His mother, and his sister, and his sister's children."

"But why?"

The answer was that kunu worked that way, and he went on to tell us about his sons. The first son had gone to the

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- 688 Marowynne to earn money that he needed for marrying. He was in good health, and he learned about the river "so it—until . . ." he knew how to travel on the river safely. But after he had been away only a short time, word came to Kasanya's village that he was ill, and before he could be brought home, he died. They brought back his hair and nail clippings so that his spirit might rest among his own people. They held a big *dede wosu*—wake—for him for six days in the village, with the little coffin and the offerings which were to accompany the spirit, and dancing and Anansi stories and the adji game, just as though he had died at home. There were many guns, too. Everything was done, and the spirit of the dead son was asked to help the family against the kunu which was brought to them by the deed of his mother's mother's brother.

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The second son died in the bush. His own gun went off accidentally as he tripped on a hidden liana and killed him, though Kasanya had provided him with all the hunting obias a man would want, and he himself had a strong Kromanti spirit, so that no gun was supposed to have power to hurt him. The third was married when he died. His boat went over in the rapids. His body was never recovered.

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"Tomorrow we shall all go and pray to the Mother of the River that she carry us well, that our journey be pleasant, that we reach the Granman's village safely. . . . There across the river is her shrine."

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It soon became clear that two things dominate the foreground of the spiritual life of the bush—death and kunu. In the last analysis, however, the two are perhaps but one force, for kunu slowly, inexorably, brings death to one member after another of the offender's kin, and it is largely the dead ancestors and the gods who are responsible for the meting out of kunu, in order that the ancient traditions and beliefs may go on. And so it was that daily, and many times daily, incidents not of our special seeking arose to document our knowledge of kunu.

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428 brothers and to his sisters' children. That is how we live here in the bush. That is how we do."

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591 When a man marries, he either arranges to take his wife to live in his own village—his mother's village—or to stay in that of his wife. Whether he chooses the one village or the other, he has to build a house there for her, and this becomes her *wosu*, her household. If he wishes, he may build two houses, one in his own village, and one in the village of his wife. Kasanya's younger brother built two houses for his first wife. One was on the lower river, next to Kasanya's own house, and the other we would reach after two days' further travel up the river.

Yet the man, explained Kasanya, if the couple were living in the village of the wife, or the woman, if their house was in his village, was not entirely at home. In one's own village a person was a *gomi*, a child of the "ground." He belonged there. But when living in another's village, even though it was that of a husband or wife, one was a [609] *wakama*, a stranger, and if a man of the village but uttered this word "*wakama*" to such an individual, the outsider had to take up his belongings and leave at once. Were the [688] stranger, in turn, to speak aloud the word "*gomi*," disaster would follow, for the earth spirits, having been disturbed, would be sure to take their toll.

594 The *wosu*—the household—is the unit of family life, whether, in its physical location, it is in one village or two villages. In it a woman lives with her husband, and here the children are reared. After the *wosu* comes the larger family unit, the *mbe*, composed of those who have come from the common womb of a more remote ancestress, while several of [614] these larger or extended families form a clan.

595 "If a man has more than one wife," said Kasanya, "then he makes more than one house. A man never puts two wives in the same house. It would not be good. Each woman has her own house, where she lives with her children. It must be so. The children of the first wife belong to her

A NIGHT AT S'EI

be possessed by them. Between the roots of the tree offerings were placed—two or three bottles on their sides, or a calabash filled with sacred clay. 82A 776

When the time came to dance to the gods of the kankan tree, a tunic of cotton was placed about its trunk. While the drums spoke to the gods, white clay was spread over the bark, a chicken was killed, and its blood allowed to spray the tree and drip into a calabash placed on the ground to receive it. Eggs inside obia pots were put beside the tree, and bottles filled with sweet liquor and the juice of sugar cane. All about its wide trunk the dancers swayed and leaped, each dancing to her own spirit until, at the height of their ecstasy, there were a few among them who would climb the great tree itself, and dance on its branches. The drums continued until the frenzy ebbed. Had they stopped sooner, those in the tree could not have remained there safely or in safety have descended to the ground. 82A 776 776

At other times, women came to Gedeonsu to ask him for children, and those who were troubled by his spirit brought offerings, though the great dances were held when the old year came to an end, and the big offerings were then made. [842] [782]

"If a man were to cut down a kankan tree, Gedeonsu would cut off his foot. I myself saw it happen," said a man to us at S'ei. "And his sister got the god." [688]●

The kankan tree gods could be bought, too. A woman who wanted fertility would seek to buy Gedeonsu. Others might wish to have Tinné. Only an individual who had a spirit which gave him the right to make obias and call the gods could get the spirit for one who wished to buy it. Such a man would take an obia pot, fill it with water and place inside it cowrie shells which had not been cleansed. After speaking his invocation, he would add a sacred white stone, called an obia stone, and with a calabash in one hand and a bell in the other, he would go to the tree and address the spirits as he rang the bell. When the water became ruffled, it was a sign that the god had entered it. Quickly he would cover the calabash with a cloth and take it away with him. [842] [434] 771 82A 776 776

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He promised readily enough to go with us, but Bayo told us later that he would not come.

"He says the white doctor cannot do more than obia can do. He says a man must take what kunu brings."

Was there no obia against kunu? we asked of Bayo.

"No, but kunu is not greater than obia. It is something else. When the Sky God gave obia to man, he gave it to help man live, not to help him do bad things. When men and women earn a kunu for their family, it is because they do what is hateful to the great gods and ancestors. Obia was not sent to save men from punishment."

• [688]

"Does obia never punish, Bayo?" We were thinking of what he said about his own obia, of how when it seized him, he destroyed things.

[888]

But he would say no more. "I am too young, Bak'a, to speak of these things. At my age I know only a little obia. You must ask the old men."

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The conversation led us one day to the obia men on the river. They were, we knew, important persons in the Bush Negro communities. An obia man of reputation was not only consulted by his own villagers and clansmen, but men and women came to him from distant villages, when those who were nearer had failed them. It occurred sometimes that even from the Awka villages on the lower river, these Saramacca obia men were sought out—perhaps this was because of the same tradition which encouraged the buying of strange gods to enlarge the family pantheon, perhaps it was because of something which touched still deeper beliefs.

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How did a man become an obia man?

From what we had already heard, it was apparent that here was something which approached the formal education of our own civilization, a form of education, indeed, which we pride ourselves is unique to our own way of life.

All other knowledge the Bush Negro child gains by being about with members of his family who are busy at

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613 In general, one can say that the law of exogamy is main-
614 tained firmly within the fractions which know completely their
genealogy. Union between classificatory "brothers" and "sisters"
belonging to different fractions remains always prohibited in
principle, but as for all the institutions of the Refugee Blacks,
the prohibition ceases to be observed if fear of suprahuman
sanctions weakens. /139/

[1784] This is what explains the difference in attitude among the
lineages. In the Awara Bakka lineage, people do not remember
that marriages between fractions may have been followed by
maladies or misfortunes, and for this reason they are no longer
feared.

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[1761] In the Kotika lineage it was the same, but an event which
took place in 1958 threw consternation. A young woman, Awini
(K1, E37, Boniville), died suddenly, and divination showed that
she had been struck down by the kunu for having married her
classificatory brother Sintamann (K3, E145, Boniville). However,
they belonged to two different fractions and their common re-
lationship was the farthest removed possible in the lineage
(tenth-degree relatives).

684 Pikadu. The offense against exogamy, pikadu (1), incest in the
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1. This word appears to come
from the Portuguese pecado, sin.

broad sense, is considered an offense against society and against
religious law; it exposes the lineage to the vengeance of the gods
who exercise the kunu on it. But in the thought of the Refugee
Blacks, if incest unleashes the functioning of existing kunu, it
does not create new ones. What has been written on this subject
by several authors seems inexact to us, at least for the Boni.

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[1761] In the example put forth above Awini's death was attributed to
the kunu brought to bear for a long time by the yorka of a man
assassinated in former times by a member of the lineage.

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[613] Committing pikadu is one of the most serious offenses that a Refugee Black can commit; of course, as in the rest of the moral prescriptions, no abstract principle is called on: the elders teach the children from their earliest years: "If you commit pikadu, you will fall ill or die." The head of the lineage inflicts severe punishments on the guilty people to boot: for the man, to make a large number of planks with an adze; for the woman, to prepare and winnow as preparation for the next brako de several touques /cans/ of rice, a long and tedious job.

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[782] However, if in spite of insults and blows a man and woman of the same bec absolutely insist on marrying, people end up, for the sake of peace and quiet, by accepting the accomplished fact. They go to the fraga tiki to make an offering of tafia to the ancestors to ask them to forgive the offense committed. No reprobation extends to the children born of this union.

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[684] In the Awara Bakka lineage, which has practically rejected the law of exogamy, the principle of a sanction remains and there is a pretense of chasing the guilty ones across the village.

Not being able to use coercion and not having the right to expel a member of the lineage, captain and council can exert no material sanction.

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684 The same notion of pikadu is attached to unions between persons of the same patrilineage, although these patrilineages have no effective organization and exist only by the transmission of the fundamental interdiction, bwasi kina.

[619] Before concluding an official or even clandestine union, the man and woman make sure that they do not have the same bwasi kina and in such a case give up their project; that, even if they are from different tribes, for example a Boni woman and a Saramaka.

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684 This prohibition is of a purely religious nature and does
688 not entail any social sanctions; those concerned are convinced
984 that in such a case a suprahuman sanction would strike them in
the form of sickness or accident.

582 Prohibitions limiting marriage. Outside of the great interdiction,
[613] pikadu, which is attached to unions within one matrilineage and
one patrilineage, two prohibitions limiting marriage are found
among the Refugee Blacks, which they express thus:

[595] --I cannot have two wives at the same time in the same
lineage. For example I am forbidden to marry two "sisters"

[587] at the same time, but if I break with my wife, I may marry
her classificatory "sister" or any other woman of the same
lineage;

[835] --I may not have relations, even passing ones, with a
[587] woman who has been married to my brother by the same mother;
in particular, if my brother has just died, I shall not be able
to marry his widow.

The Boni are not capable of explaining the deep reasons
for these interdictions, but they interpret them as purely social
[684] and not religious prohibitions. The offender is simply threatened
with being beaten.

[171] The first of these rules seems very widely accepted in
Black Africa, as much in patrilineal societies as in a matrilineal
system.

[171] The second of these rules is characteristic in the Akan
(Agni, Baoulé) culture area and shows that the family custom
of the Refugee Blacks is related much more directly to that of
the Agni-Ashanti group than to that of the Dahomey.

184 One can note that this rule is exactly contrary to the
587 Saramaka custom, which obliges the widow to marry one of the
114 brothers of the dead man; this custom has been interpreted by
several authors as coming from imitation of the levirate of the
Jews, with which certain rebels were acquainted (it is known that
among the slaveowners there were many Jews).

/198 cont. /

167 old woman of 90, A..., who died in Asisi in January, 1957.
754 Having lived with Creoles in her youth, she had come back to live in her native village for at least 30 years and had never given occasion for any unfavorable remark. Nevertheless, upon her death it appeared that she had wisi.

771 Attitude toward Christianity. The Refugee Blacks, who are
829 acquainted better than one might believe with the conceptions
177 of the populations in the midst of whom they live, have a clear feeling of the relationship which exists between their meta-physical and moral conceptions and those of Christianity. They think they worship the same god as the Christians, in a completely different way but just as sound. They have no animosity
[797] whatever toward the Catholic and Protestant clergy, and most of them agree willingly to wearing crosses or medals. But they have not the least intention of abandoning their beliefs for that. They do not perceive the contradiction and do not understand that people might want to oblige them to choose.

851 Like the Creole gold miners, they attach great importance
171 to baptism, considered as an obia protective against the dangers of the bush. On Christmas, 1957 they were strongly impressed
165 by the accidental death of a Djuka Christian living at the
797 Kotika school. He refused to observe mourning for his wife
[688] according to the custom of the Refugee Blacks, and used to go to drink in the cabarets of the Creole villages. On Christmas
[273] evening, when drunk, he drowned himself. That was attributed
[784] to a suprahuman punishment. We heard /199/ the following reflection on this subject: "He was baptized and he drowned himself just the same. That is therefore not worth the trouble."

61 Actually, the matrilineal structure of the Refugee Blacks
581 and their conception of marriage form an irreducible cleavage,
571 which appears immediately as soon as one leaves the meta-physical conceptions to pass to the plane of practical living.

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Not just anyone may resort to divination on behalf of someone else: only the eldest have the right to do it, and it has happened that the grand man punished offenders severely.

777 Fate. The Refugee Blacks do not attribute all misfortunes to suprahuman causes. They have the notion of natural accident, ɔŋgɔku. They say ɔŋgɔku miti mi, or again ogi miti mi, [752] misfortune met me. They also accept the idea of natural death. [761] They usually regard as natural death that of the very old, the infirm from birth, and sickly children.

Divination blames fate in ten to 20 per cent of accidents. It is the usual explanation for hunting accidents.

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Magic Forces

As we have shown, the Refugee Blacks consider beings and things as a world of forces capable of acting on one another, outside of time and space, according to laws which men cannot understand but of which they believe they have a partial and empirical knowledge transmitted by tradition since the time of the ancestors. They distinguish negative magic forces, wisi, which have the effect of diminishing the vital force of men, which makes them sick or kills them, and positive magic forces, ɔbia, which come from the gods: the ɔbia comes to increase the vital force of men, giving them protection, immunity, or knowledge. But no power is in essence a principle of good or evil; nothing is impossible for him who knows the formulas; this is why the magic of the Refugee Blacks is reduced to a perpetual and indecisive struggle between ɔbia and wisi.

754 Wisi. Wisi is sorcery in the African sense of the term, that is, [673] the use of magic procedures to harm others; wisi is for the Refugee Blacks the pre-eminently criminal act, at the same time against morals and against society. The struggle against

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755 The mañtif asked 2,000 francs from him as the price of
648 his consultation.

789 Curse. Someone who judges himself victim of evil-doing has at his disposal a supreme resource: /247/ cursing his adversary, that is, appealing directly to the supreme God, Masa Gadu, to ask him to punish his adversary. This is called seni gadu -- sending God -- against someone. To do that, while asking God to kill him or make him sick, one kneels and strikes the ground with both hands in the presence of the adversary or in front of his house. This act is regarded as totally different from wisi, for one is relying on the justice of God, who judges with equity and punishes only the guilty.

However that may be, cursing is for the Refugee Blacks a very serious act. It may happen that, feeling guilty, the source of the injustice asks pardon and promises to make amends for his misdeeds. The one who uttered the curse again implores Masa Gadu in order to take back the words he spoke: "He has given me satisfaction, do nothing against him." But oftener still it happens that a complicated affair is involved, that both parties concerned are persuaded of their legitimate ground and curse each other. The case must then be carried before the grand man and straightened out at once or misfortunes may pounce upon both lineages. The grand man judges without appeal and inflicts a punishment on the one who was wrong on the main issue of the debate. Then he obliges the adversaries to be reconciled before the fraga tiki, where the offering of tafia and water is made.

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[262] The effect of these conceptions is to render nearly impossible hidden hatreds and rancors, which the Refugee Blacks fear very much, for they are the source of wisi.

• 688 In general, the act of getting angry in public and seriously
689 insulting somebody is considered as an offense against moral and religious law, capable of attracting misfortunes; it is an

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attenuated form of wisi; in serious cases the grand man may inflict a severe punishment on the guilty ones.

789 obia. The Refugee Blacks use the word obia (1) to designate

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1. The term obia is used by the Refugee Blacks when they are speaking to outsiders, to designate positive magic, but in reality this term has a very different meaning in their language. It designates any kind of magic action, negative as well as positive; likewise the term obiamā has the sense of sorcerer as well as that of holder of a remedy.

The Boni among themselves use the word deesi, remedy, instead of obia. They do not use the word deesimā in place of obiamā. It is said, for example, of a man who knows the rites of a cult of possession "A sabi Papa gadu sani" (he knows the things of Papa gadu).

The term gadamā designates one who is possessed of a god, and not one who knows how to bring on possession.

In the rest of this work we shall continue, nevertheless, to use the terms obia and obiamā to designate positive magic, in order to facilitate collation with the English- and Dutch-language authors who have used it in this sense.

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